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ABSTRACT

This essay explores cultural differences in pictorial perception, cites historical developments and relationships of the media and the black family, and provides a basis for using educational media to effect positive self-concepts within the black family. The interpretation of representations of blacks in films, television, radio, recordings, print media, and advertising is discussed, as are the effects of such representations on the attitudes of black families. References are provided. (FM)

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# THE MEDIA: VIEWS AND PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK FAMILIES

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# THE MEDIA: VIEWS AND PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK FAMILIES

Western culture has proven dominate in the shaping of socializations associated with the black family. Many of these socializations have resulted in innate responses from messages delivered via sight and sound. Foremost has been the effect of media-messages upon individual self-concepts within the black family structure. The media has persuaded and influenced the shaping of personal values and subsequent actions of persons of African descent. There is a growing body of empirical, scientific and circumstantial evidence which strongly implies that media, as perceived and perpetrated by Western culture, has a detrimental effect upon black families and upon black male self-concept in particular.

The mass media, that is, films and television; radio and records; newspapers, magazines, comics and cartoons; and advertising constitutes a powerful force. This mode of communication has the capability of reaching masses of people at one time. The advent of electronic technology and media reduces communication possibilities to micro-seconds while taxing rational judgements and suspending man's spirit. It appears that "the media" has a warped perception of the black family and subsequently, has presented an inaccurate view of Afro-Americans to society.

The purpose of this perspectus shall be to explore cultural differences in pictorial perception, to cite some historical developments and relationships of the media and the black family, and to provide a basis for the use of educational media to affect positive self-concepts within the black family. Educational and commercial

media should serve the public in hopes that people will recognize and serve each other. Media should be devoted to the betterment of life.

## PICTURE PERCEPTION AND CULTURE

A code has been described as "an agreed transformation, or set of unambiguous rules, whereby messages are converted from one representation to another."[1] A picture is a series of lines on a flat surface that represent a recognizable sign or symbol. A sign is a representation perceived as having significance beyond itself, and symbols can be considered as codes.

The ability to recognize codes, signs and symbols, is common in most cultures and generally universal in man. Signs and symbols must have the same meaning for the person producing the symbol as it does for the interpreter if effective communication is to occur. Ineffective communications exist when the user of symbolic material does not implicitly react to it in the same manner as the producer of the material. Whether or not symbols have the same meaning for producer and user provide a basis for the study of intercultural communication.

Scant evidence exist that such representations cross cultural lines. People in different cultures perceive and interpret pictorial information differently. The understanding of these differences warrant investigation if a better insight of the nature of human perception is to be established.

The perception of pictorial information seems concomitantly linked to some aspects of performance. Performance is the end result of molecular activity. The molecule, the smallest particle of matter that is the same chemistry as the whole mass, and the secretion of genes

may be the keys to understanding how man functions. In man, perception affects not only the interpretation of the spoken and written word, but also his relationship to visual media. The attainment of such evidence, in such a sophisticated organic animal as man, is elusive indeed. However, in less complex bioligical species, empirical evidence of molecular responses has been noted.[2]

Experiments on rabbits have revealed that a certain molecule may only reach some portions of the olfactory membrane. In dogs, the sense of smell exceeds vision in obtaining clues from the environment. Other experiments have noted that the ears of dogs, bats and noctuid moths are sensitive to far greater frequencies than man. Bees respond to nine of thirty-four substances which man had noted as being sweet.

The eye sees -absorbs- material which is possessed by the brain. It is the brain which is the decision-making mechanism of cognitive structure and information from the environment outside. People from different cultures do not always necessarily see what the producer of visual material presents before their eyes. Many times they see what they expect to see within the limits of their comprehension.

Anthropologists have noted differences in pictorial perceptions by members of remote tribes. Other evidence reveals that African tribal subjects, children and adults, had difficulty in perceiving depth in pictorial material presented in accordance with traditions of Western culture. Even as pragmatic inquiry, there appears to be little universal commonality in the interpretation of symbols. There are differences in which way two dimensional messages can be interpretated.

## THE MASS MEDIUMS

### Films and Television

Films through it's inherent process and use of photography, editing, symbolism and sound, are capable of effecting the most accute audio-visual responses in man. No two people see the same film and no one sees the same film twice in the same way. It is important to remember that in viewing films, objectivitity does not exist - only varying degrees of objectivitity. Commercial films made in this country have done much to shape cultural beliefs, establish customs and fashionabilities and reinforce stereotypes of various cultures.

To be sure, the medium of film has been omnipotent in its' treatment of the white male and conversely, callously cruel in its' treatment of the black male. Historically and traditionally, the American cinema has chosen to portray the white male as independent, fearless, superior and violent. The result has been that the movie public has been conjured into believing misconceptions about men in general. Many white men have come to believe that they don't need anyone and any feelings to the contrary would be a sign of weakness. Commerical films have been, and continue to be produced which are sellable and compatible with current values and taste of a social system dominated by whites.

Originally the portraiture of blacks in films was closely aligned to the Southern literary and theatrical tradition. Since little was known of black behavior when the new technology of films emerged in the late 1890's. Blacks were viewed and appeared as comics, brutes ,studs, pathetic freeman and misfortunate mulattos. Most damaging to the development of black self-concept, and to the acceptance

of Black-Americans in the United States were the myths created of tropical Africa.

Africa was depicted as a "dark continent", a far off hot jungle teeming with ferocious animals and black illiterate uncivilized savages. What in actuality had been produced was a conception of all black people, and the subliminal suggestion that descendents of such people, Afro-Americans, can be expected to perform the same way. Such widespread involvement of the masses in films and later, television, accelerated efforts on the part of most persons in the country to insulate themselves against that which they didn't understand. Unforturnately these efforts at insulation through regimentation have produced white self-concepts sprinkled with racism and black self-concepts tainted by confusion. The effects have been two-fold on Black-Americans. There has been a striving for acceptance within certain quarters of an insulated system bent on self-destruction (as witness by the black on black crime).

Television, an extension of films, is the electronic wizard of all media. The technical elements, recording the picture, editing or mixing the pictures, and transmission of the message is accomplished electronically. Because of it's access into our lives, television more than any other medium has infinite potential for education or propoganda. In the past thirty years, television has cast all other media in a supporting role, In Western culture, one cannot escape its' pervasive dominance. The Television Information Office reports that television credibility is at an all time high, and Americans rate it above schools, local government, churches, the police and newspapers. Still, little is known of the continuous effect of television satuation

on the mass audience, Black-Americans and other minorities.

The viewing habits of American children have been estimated to be from four to six hours a day. Each year more programs are directed at children, especially at pre-schoolers whose minds are more receptive and least discriminating than other ages. Studies have shown that children of lower socioeconomic status view more television than children of higher socioeconomic status.[3] Another study revealed that race and ethnic background are factors in the viewing habits of older children.[4] Language, life-style and self-concept are variables which alter the effect of media and instruction of the culturally different learner and needs far more investigation.

The relationship of the viewing habits of white and black Americans is similar. Research has shown that blacks depend heavily upon television for news outside the black community;[5] black and whites exhibit similarities in what shows are liked least and what constitutes a bad show;[6] less educated and lower status blacks tend to view more television, and more educated blacks tend to view majority and black oriented public affairs programs more often.[7] It has been reported that poor blacks view more television than poor whites,[8] but that low-income blacks tend to have media habits similar to low-income whites.[9]

Research which has attempted to study the attitudes, behaviors and effects pf the media upon Black-Americans has been inadequate. Most of this research has suffered as a result of failure to consider the diversity of the black community in the research design, methodological shortcomings, or to consider the dehibilitating effects of the media upon specific audiences. Even less is known of the socializing

effect of films and television on the Black American family. Surely this form of visual communication must operate alongside cultural and environmental influences to produce a wide range of responses within the context of black identity and black group structure.

Radio and Records

Although not as visible as film and television, the control of American radio has been largely responsible for all broadcast material that is consumed by the masses. The growth of broadcasting in the United States is a scenario of a battle for control of scientific electronic inventions by industrialists, government intervention, and the selling and buying of goods and services by the very same industrialists. More importantly, radio will provide an outlet for black self-indulgence, and consolution and escape from Western culture. The black holocaust and the universality of black ethnicity will be proclaimed via the transmission of black music.

Historically, the transmission of audio messages has proceeded the transmission of pictorial ones. Scientific work with film started before experiments with sound transmission. The first public film was displayed in 1905, the first commercial radio broadcast in 1922; the first film with sound in 1928, the first dramatic radio program in 1930. Radio was a novelty for everybody during the 1930's. During World War II the government used the radio extensively to deliver war-information messages, appeals for financial contributions (bonds), instructions in civil defense, moral and public service announcements. It was not until 1947 that black oriented radio was established with WDIA in Memphis, Tennessee, and WOOK in Washington, D. C.

Economics has been credited for the rise of black oriented radio

stations.[10] Of the 7,571 commercial radio stations in the country, 57 are black-owned.[11] This medium may be the single most powerful mass medium for reaching and communicating with the black population of this country.[12] Although appealing to a small subgroup, black radio has survived vividly as a result of advertising. Programming, for the most part, has been limited to a distribution of black music, with little time devoted to information about the community or for public affairs.

The recent rise of the disco phenomenal in the country can be attributed, in part, to the attention that Black Americans have given to the sound of so-called black music. Over the past several years, black music has influenced the creation and orchestration of music, and the commercialization of music promotion by Western culture.

Breathed from African rhythms, and nutured by work songs, spirituals and the blues, black music has emerged as the only original artistic contribution from Western culture. In the twenties and thirties "rhythm and blues" was referred to as race music music by the greater majority. It was a music misunderstood by whites and hated by many middle class blacks. The transmutation of many white beliefs about Black Americans can be attributed to, and is in direct proportion to white America's acceptance of black music. The assimilation of Black Americans into Western culture, and the humanistic socialization of numerous white Americans has been encouraged and aided by this unique sound.

The effects that black music has had on Black Americans have resulted in a positive image of self, while buttressing the black

self in an alien environment. The development of this music is a documentation of the cultural, emotional and economic history of Black Americans. Perhaps the music can be equated to a statement made by Ray Charles: "I'm from the South and being from the South, there were two things you always knew. You knew who you were and you knew where you belonged."

Newspapers, Magazines, Comics and Cartoons

With the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, Western man vastly increased his literate capabilities.

It has been estimated that approximately 20 percent of the worlds' news readers are in the United States, although only 7 percent of the worlds' population resides in the U. S. Newspapers, the first form of communication to reach a mass audience, function to inform and interpret on a national, regional or local level. Periodically, newspapers have been suppressed by those in power for being too presentative of the democratic process. Magazines and the black press have always somehow managed to function for special interest groups. Interestingly enough a comic strip, drawn to attract readership and printed in yellow ink, is responsible for the term "yellow journalism."

Excluding the black press, newspapers have virtually ignored black America. The crusading newspaper has acquired a reputation of being a power for good, a champion of the underdog and modifier needed against the evils of society. The truth of the matter is that newspapers have represented and fostered the tone and temperment of the country as pointed out by the National Advisory Commision on Civil Disorders: "Along with the country as a whole, the press has

too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white man's eyes and a white perspective."

Newspapers have not been hesitant in representing business and commerce. But then, sixty to seventy percent of newspapers consist of advertising. Since the industry did not perceive of Black Americans as having significant purchasing power in society, advertisers seldom attempted to reach this minority. Black Americans were not represented at the economic, governmental and educational policymaking levels and did not have access from this perspective. Little attention was given to black social, service and church club activities. Black Americans generally have been ignored unless they made trouble or were troublesome.

Magazines and the black press has grown steadily since World War II. The "separatist" nature of magazines and the black press, and the country's move toward a post-industrial society, have all contributed to questioning if a mass audience really exists. Todays' fragmented society will become more visible as the "mass audience" moves towards the 21st century, as will the importance and the persuasive powers of magazines and the black press.

For almost 100 years after its conception in 1827, the black press was clearly an institution with a cause. The black press existed to document the plight of Black Americans, and to serve as a forum for improving the human condition. The early journal served as a means of communication between black leaders and intellectuals. John Murphy, founder of the Baltimore Afro-American, once described these journals as "spearheads of protest." The dye was cast for the image and tonality of black newspapers in the early 1920's by Robert

S. Abbott, editor and founder of the Chicago Defender. He aimed his publication at mass black readership with sensationalistic reporting and extensive coverage of activities in the black community. Many black editors now realize that "names make news." Perhaps echoing within every black concept of self is "What's my name?" The printing of names by the black press has been more than casually significant in restoring a sense of loss identity while maintaining a positive self-image for Black Americans.

The cartoon has existed alongside the newspaper ever since "The Yellow Kid" was first introduced in the late 1890's. The purpose of the comic strip was to entertain, and even today, this section of the newspaper is more frequently read. Political cartoons augment editorials and their psychological overtones influence the opinions of those who can and cannot read. The political cartoons which have appeared in newspapers over the years have treated Black Americans as though they were invisible. Seldom have the achievements, awkward circumstances or the humiliations of Black Americans been illustrated; nor have the scores of confrontations, which have been brought about as a result of efforts to improve the human condition, appeared graphically on editorial pages.

Comics and the cinema both communicate by telling a story in a series of still pictures designed to give the illusion of motion. Television has capitalized upon these similarities as witness by the number of cartoons and commercials programmed for children on Saturday morning. Considering the audience, these advertisments represent the most effective single-concept teaching unit. Children do not have the coping mechanisms to resist the "need for the product" that has been designed. Without parental authority and modeling

from elders, children can become possessions of the media.

Black cartoonists deliver a humorous message that can be understood by Black Americans as they relate to present day problems. E. Simms Campbell, considered the first black cartoonist; Morrie Turner, creater of "Wee Pals,"; Brunsic Brandon, penman of "Luther and His Friends,"; Edward Carr, from whom emerged "Butter and Boop,", and; Chester Commodore, Editorial Cartoonist for The Chicago Defender, have contributed significantly to the sustenance of a postive self-concept in the black community through their art. The media has not welcomed black cartoon-artist any more than the controlling society has accepted the black fine-artist. Black Americans, especially the black middle class tendency to inhibit spontaneity in children, have looked upon the cartoon as not being a serious effort. But serious is as serious does. The Black American artist has visualized his history and traditions with a spirit that has helped all oppressed people survive while charting the course of modern art. It would not be economically appropriate for the media to include such "folk art" for it's Saturday morning television programming.

Advertising

Advertising in the United States is a complexed, sophisticated, vicious and insistent pop art-science. It surrounds the consumer overtly and quietly intimidates him covertly in his public and private life. Advertising is almost exclusive relied upon by the mass media to the point of being almost "machiavellian" in nature. Advertisers have had little regard for the black consumer. The late courtship of this minority has resulted in disproportinate spending on the part of the black middle class, and disproportionate prices for those living in the inner city.

It was not until the early 1950's that advertising in the U. S. began to direct messages at the basic physical and emotional needs and weaknesses of potential buyers. Motivational research is relied upon heavily in the mass manipulation of the consumers' psyche. The ad-to-ego approach has produced gullible consumers who have been persuaded to buy more and more, because life can be lived better by striving for new material goods, and because pleasure is the chief good in life. Advertising stimulates the economy and in the process Black Americans have been abused, victimized and severed.

The advent of integration was a blessing in disguise for white business and for advertisers aiming their huckstering at the black consumer. Scores of Black Americans were afforded housing and opportunities to shop in areas where previously they had been denied. Armed with increased mobility and access to spacious shopping areas, this often resulted in continued loyality to numerous white produced products, and an unwillingness to boycott products. Most damaging has been the disproportionate amount of income returned by the black middle class to the controlling population of which they are so critical.

It has been estimated that blacks earning $15,00 plus spend much more for housing, new cars, color television sets and watches than do "average" whites earning $15,000 plus.[13] The black consumer in black neighborhoods receives poorer quality goods and services but pays much more for fundamental basics as food, clothing and appliances. Yet it appears that the percentage of income devoted to the support of black business by blacks earning less than $15,000 is greater than that percentage of income given by blacks earning

more than $15,000. This trend has been fueled by advertising media which prostitutes the visual and acoustic fabric of black culture - and other dark skinned cultures- for the purpose of merchandising products.

Perhaps the real psyche of American advertising media is summed up in a shirt commercial. The commercial, produced extremely well technically and visually, ends with the statement, "We make American shirts for your European body."

Cancerous Wizardry

Medias' unique characteristics has created a unique visual and acoustic culture: film distorts and television sedates; radio is the constant companion and prophesizes the constant technological hum which will surround man in the 21st century. Newspapers are for the proletariats; magazines educate for avocations; cartoons are now worth two thousand words, and; advertisments will reinforce roles while making everyone feel good about spending money.

The mass mediums, a representation of Western culture, have not been kind to Black Americans. The commercial media has not included Black Americans simply because they have not been included as an intragal part of American Society. The media has been a contributing factor which has impeded the development of the black family in the United States. The black family is non-existant with white America largely due to the media's treatment of the black male. He has either been ignored by the media or presented as a casual, comic or tragic figure. The consequence is an ethnic culture more fragmented than 200 years ago attempting to survive with negative and weak egos, and functioning with role-lock perceptions. The effect has been that few

blacks are aware of the importance of developing the black male for paternal and family functioning.

## THE FUTURE, SEX AND VIOLENCE

The future is now. Sex has replaced sensitivity, and Rollerball is here as elegant violence in the form of rugby and football.

The impact on human life from the explosiveness of electronic and nuclear technology is infinite. Space exploration, the electronic media and economics will compete for center stage. Groups, deliberately and benignly neglected by the controlling population, will continue to foster spiritual revolutions. Television, with it's ability to addict and to homogenize, will continue to dilute cultural traditions. Mass saturation of sexual images fostered with ASS (aggression, sublity, sublinity) will continue to be presented to man as both mistress and wife. Mass saturation of images dipicting anti-social acts, violence, and collision sports will succeed in training youth "how to." Criminality will increase, regard for human life will decrease; and models and athletics will be the whores chosen by Western culture to act out it's sexual and sadistic nature. Perhaps the ultimate intellectual and emotional achievement for Western cultured-man will be an obsession with science and pleasure, while being served sex and violence by an electronic technician.

As man makes attempts to understand and move into outer space, so too will he attempt to understand the fantastic journeys to be explored in inner space. Biochemical-electronics and high-voltage photography are two near-future possibilities. The control of mental processes, reactions and sense perceptions by biochemical signals is less than a generation away. The control of sense perception and

muscular activity would be facillitated by a socket installed by a surgeon beneath the scalp. Electrodes would reach selected areas of brain tissue controlled by bioelectric signals radiating from transmitters. High voltage or Kirlian photography was first developed in Russia in the early 1930's. It is based on the belief that objects contain energy which is discharged as a luminous "aura." Photographing the "aura" or coronal discharge by using a high-frequency electronic field and infrared film, has the potential of detecting the physical and emotional state of man.

Humanity as it is now defined on earth, will not continue to exist unless technology can be tempered with man's spirit. The potentials of the effects of science and technology upon organisms far exceeds mans' desire to survive. Many of the media's ill effects upon Black Americans would be negated once Black Americans identify with that branch of philosophy that speaks directly to African heritage. Thus, Black Americans can make a significant contribution to universal rational balance through self-identity.

In discussing the black child's image of the future, Alvin Poussaint concludes that the operation of self-image as a motivator for behavior is directly linked to the future, and operates like a self-fulling prophecy.[15] In another analysis, Poussaint and Carolyn Atkinson concluded that blacks must gain a sense of control over their environment in order to gain self-confidence.[16] Black Americans may be the most adaptable in demonstrating two basic concepts of self that were put forth by C. S. Pierce and Geofferey Hudson.

Pierce[17] was probably the first to postulate that the self was two-fold. He believed the self concept was formed from commerce with

objects and the testimony of other people. Hudson[18] inferred that the self was an element of internal and external environments. He contended that the purpose of life was to transform the powers latent in the ego into dynamic energy characterized by discipline and freedom.

## MOVING ON THE MEDIA

This is the age of visual communication and of the moving image. The mass audience sits mesmerized, sedated and addicted- transfixed by instantaneous pictures that are waved like wands before their eyes. In the interplay of man and media, these pictures speak in ways which are not immediately perceived. The mass audience seems incapable of mastering the medias many codes, incapable of processing the vast amounts of information and incapable of developing strategies for personal growth and enhancement. Specific audiences concerned more with the communication of facts, opinions and ideas for their benefit are in a better position to learn and to teach within the context of visual and acoustical communication.

There are several media related areas which need to be addressed if Black Americans are to be included in Western society and for their insolation against the negative effects of electronic media and print media.

Black elected and appointed officials must ensure that government be more responsible for their constituents. Officials and members of governing boards must attempt to influence the effects of commercial and public television. Public television, supported primarily by tax dollars, must take the initiative in programming for children. Community and citizen groups must demand that public television be more responsive to the needs of the entire public, and not just those

audiences who make tax-deductable contributions.

Within the sphere of education are many opportunities for human interaction while advancing scientific and technological development. Institutions who lay claim to a black cultural tradition would do well to engage in research including the study of gene and gene secretion, perception, sensory physiology, cognitive psychology and intercultural communications research. Researchers and scholars must give more attention to visual communication, the control of visuals in learning environments, and the relationship of culture and self.

Utilization of the male in the formative learning years has gone unsolicited by educational programs. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that half the black children born in the United States during 1976 were born to unmarried women. Education departments at black schools have yet to actively recruit males for early childhood and special education programs. Educational programs must be designed to systematically train teachers for day care and community centers, nursing homes, prisons, hospitals and mental health agencies.

The proper use of media in educational environments can aid in the search for black selfhood. Educational technology, the integration of media in the teaching process, allows students to engage in group activities, and to be media producers rather than media consumers while developing visual literacy skills. Research in audio-visual communication should breech the gap between the world of information and the world of school and ethical behavior.

Listening literacy, the ability to decipher auditory messages, is as important as visual literacy. The use of auditory devices in

learning environments can develop listening skills while delivering content. The hypnotic power of radio has not been capitalized upon to achieve instructional goals. The use of instructional radio in learning environments for Black Americans can have many advantages. It is a medium which stimulates the imagination, it is economical, convenient, excellent for conveying natural and impressionist sounds, and ideal for music broadcasting. Classroom lessons and broadcast programming on the history of African sounds, the steel drum orchestras of Trinidad combined with the mechanics of writing and recording music can contribute to positive black self-concept.

Parents, especially the black woman, must insolate the self-concept of the black male against some of the negative effects of the media. Gone are the days when families would gather around the household's only radio or television set. Today, each member more than likely has his own radio and television. Each member sinks into the media and is subconsciously seized by the intimidation of direct family and outside-world experience. Parents must be conscious of negative influences and not allow children to watch television unattended. Most importantly, parents must look for and make opportunities to call their children's names as well as the name's of friends of their children.

Black Americans must confront many unique problems in Western culture, its society and schools. The views and perceptions of black families held by "the media" is but one. Attention given to such a doctrine will only serve to develop conceptions of self in black children, and reinforce conceptions of self in black adults which result in negative self-images and self-defeating behaviors. If the

media does in fact hold to this doctrine, then it is a problem of the media. The multitude of black students who have expressed a professional interest in the field of communications must realize the committment they are seeking to undertake. As communicators working in the larger society, they represent scores of relatives, friends and associates. Their unusually high visibility could have an accute effect upon the masses of black audiences to which they communicate.

The sociolizations of Western culture have revealed that family life in black America is perceived different from that in white America. The medias' socializing effects has systemically kept this particular minority from a positive self-image. However, there is no need for Black Americans to be fashioned by the media or the times in which they live. For peer relationships between blacks living in the United States has always been the catalyst for cultural, political and economic instruction. It appears to be some time away before Black Americans cannot be shaped by an African heritage and by that which they love.

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